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Review: Robert Emmitt, The Legend of Ogden Jenks

Book Reviews

THE LEGEND OF OGDEN JENKS by Robert Emmitt. 203 pages. McNally & Loftin. $5.95, 1970; Ballantine Books. 95¢, 1971.

Robert Emmitt's *The Legend of Ogden Jenks* is much more than a "western." True, it has a pre-Civil War setting in the same Brown's Hole country of Northwestern Colorado that produced Butch Cassidy, but this is a new breed of novel laid in the American West, introspective, metaphysical, and ruggedly poetic. Among its several universal themes this uncommon story illustrates the essence of primordial evil in the world. Og, like Gog and Magog of the Apocalypse, is a giant force warring with anyone who would dare change him. A related theme, the dignity of the individual, is not exemplified so much in the major character's overpowering individuality as it is in the patient endurance of his black foil. Subtly the novel allegorizes the Unites States' record in race relations as objectified in Og's dealings with the black man, Dot. Certainly, the book is a terse indictment of the shallowness of materialism.

Gouged out by the "swipe of a bear's paw," Og's face has one Polyphemian eye "pasted wide, round, forever staring startled," not unlike the all-seeing eye of this country's Great Seal gazing out from a one-dollar bill. Og gouges out a fortune in copper from "the mocking walls of rock he mines." With no face, he becomes larger-than-life personification of greed: blind, plundering rapacity. Og's taste of wealth turns him into an insatiable human shovel, removing but never replacing. Jenks does not eat food; he mechanically "scoops the product into the slant scar on his face."

Og's brand of mindless acquisitiveness is a nonintellectual "Let's do it" or "Let's get it." Novelist Emmitt's second book set in the American West raises Clifton Fadiman's question again: "Once we've got it, what have we got and what do we do with it?" Og's years of sacrifice and search for wealth bring him very little satisfaction. His struggle to wrest wealth from nature has been the whole universe to him, a chess game "between pondering players." Once done, this "birthing and building. . . cooled like a fever out of his hands and arms and back." Og's is the sterile plight of the *nouveaux riche* in a raw, new country: "He could think of nothing else to do, and he doubted that he would ever think of anything else. . . Og would listen to the music of the dollars, try to think beyond it and fail."

Fighting the ennui of his meaningless existence, Og kills for pleasure. Amoral, he takes human life with no more compunction than he does the lives of small, running animals he pins "squealing to the ground" with the long, slim blade he carries phallus-like "as though grown to him." He cannot relate to other people except as they are "things" to be acquired and used: A woman, to Og, is a cook, housekeeper, bedpartner; a mining partner is a tool as dispensable as another pack mule.

It is as a mule that Og sees his first mining partner, Dot. This Tennessean, tired of misty winters, seeks out the highlands and attaches himself to Jenks. Og finds himself "riding toward town beside this black man when he had done everything to prevent it. . . He seemed to recall that this nigger was always about half wanted by whatever law there happened to be . . . but nobody disliked him enough to do away with him."

Dot, the archetypal black particle in a white Western world, can see with the reader that he is the partner Og Jenks needs. Together, white and black carve out more than enough wealth for both. The mine becomes, in fact, an American microcosm which Dot sees as " 'our mine' . . . and might well have called 'my mine' . . that big old rock house you think keep you so safe from all these niggers for leven

million billion years. . . I comin' to get you. Look out, Mister Richman Vein, I comin' in fury to tear you right out that big old mansion house of yours." Swinging his sledge and singing his wry work songs, Dot is a more self-aware John Henry agitating for "green power," a wilier Jim on guard against Og's perversion of a treasure-crazy Huck Finn. To the paranoid Jenks, it appears that Dot holds his backswing too long, "grinning and deciding between the head of the drill and the head of Og." Putting his foot through Dot's banjo, Jenks kicks out his black partner without so much as a nugget from the mine. His hopes for equality crushed and his rights denied, Dot tries to reconcile himself temporarily to "the way of things: to build a railroad for somebody to ride on, kill and cook the meat for sombody to eat, work a mine to get the ore out for somebody . . . build a tight cabin, a warm fire inside" for somebody else.

And yet the dispossessed does not stray far from the mine. He observes at a discreet distance the succession of mining partners come and go: an unbelievably naive college professor, whose humanism Og rejects; Hutson, a guileless herd drover, whose compassion Og equates with weakness. Og's malevolence, described by Dot as the "natural all-bad man," becomes a legend as one "of the area's natural phenomena, unfailingly described or pointed out to visitor and newcomer."

Not even marriage to the ex-prostitute Marcel can domesticate Og, even though the marriage of acquisitiveness to Marcel's mercantilism seems appropos. Her "bizarre experience of accepting Og" is like the earth's yielding to a bulltongue plow. A depleted, passive earth goddess, she is another acquiescent canyon he has raped. Eventually he calls her a "dirty, old dryhole slut." The crowd that fetes their union is "a strange conglomerate: a banker, a gambler, an attorney, a trail drover, merchants, miners, a chambermaid, and a minister's wife, the whole of it proud and pleased by its outrageous concoction." But the coarse frontier community can hardly impart instant respectability to its own raw kind. Marcel, rootless and in need of a tradition, carts with her the framed portrait of an old lady, who she claims is her great-grandmother rescued from "the plantation house the day Yankees burned it to the ground . . . The one freedom she understood was that of believing, making it true for herself."

The homicidal Irish drifter who appropriates Og's woman is the opportunistic "Murphy the common brown rock." Dot says Murphy is "all jackrabbit-folks melted up together like lead rifle balls in a pot" (the same pot that has not amalgamated Dot). This handsome, sadistic Snopes on the make also "inherits" Dot's rifle, with which he dispatches Og from ambush.

After white rapacity has destroyed white rapacity, as with Faulkner's Yoknapatawphans, it is Emmitt's black who endures. Dot, whose "maddening dignity" has infuriated Og and served as a unifying presence in the structure of the novel, moves in finally to claim what he now calls "my mine." The non-violent at last has his own "garden," and like Voltaire's Candide, he plans to work it.

Emitt, Managing Editor at Vanderbilt University Press, is also the author of *The Last War Trail.*

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